

Negative Space: Food and Celebration in Aristophanes' *Frogs*

By the time of Aristophanes' *Frogs* at the 405 Lenaia, not long before the battle of Aegospotami, food was limited. The Spartan occupation of Decelea in 413 removed Athenians from Euboea, then the main source of the imported cereals on which Attica had come to depend, and Black Sea imports were problematical (Moreno, 2007 and Bissa, 2008). Annual Spartan incursions damaged the olive groves providing Athens' only significant agricultural export (Foxhall 1993, *inter alios*), and impacted all other crops. Assessments vary of the overall economic costs (cf. Bresson, 2016), given different circumstances for destroying — or restoring — production of cereals, grapes, olives, and farm animals, and their disparate dietary and economic functions. However, James Thorne (2001) has produced substantial evidence that combined amphibious attacks and long-term Spartan occupation was devastating for the grain supply, in addition to losses of other commodities.

It is thus not surprising that both the type and context of Aristophanes' references to such issues in the *Frogs* differ markedly from those in his earlier *Acharnians*, *Knights*, and *Peace*, which are specific about wartime hunger and peacetime satiety (Pütz, 2007). The concept of negative space, familiar from studies in art and design and applicable to literature, is helpful in understanding his changed approach. Using negative space requires artists to defamiliarize themselves to their works and focus on what is not part of a drawing in order to reveal what is necessary; an example is turning it upside down. (cf. Angle 1994, quoting Flannery O'Connor's application of art classes to novelistic technique: "A lot of excess stuff will drop off this way.")

Much of the action in *Frogs* is literally out of place, occurring in the Underworld. The contexts and moral values of communal food and drink, both there and above ground, reinforce

the Athenians' desperation. Entering the Underworld, the ghostly frog chorus push into the song they once resounded (217 *ιαγήσαμεν*; cf. Pütz 2007) when the “hungover rabble” (218-9 *κραιπαλόκωμος ... ὄχλος*) meandered through Athens. Dionysus's longing for Euripides “devours” him (66 *δαρδάπτει*), like hunger for pea soup (63 *ἔτνους*). Meanwhile, the shifting possession of Heracles' club and lionskin in the first part of the play keeps the excess and disorder they occupy in roughly the same location. The only banquet in *Frogs* occurs in Hades, by upending the divine Underworld space as an Athenian kitchen after Xanthias has temporarily assumed Heracles' accoutrements. Xanthias takes advantage of the ensuing misrecognition, consuming “two or three pots” of *ἔτνους*, an ox, pies, and rolls (503-507; Dover, 1993). Once Dionysus dons Heracles' accessories, an innkeeper pursues him because of the hero's delinquencies for cheese (558), fish (559), and twenty half-obol orders of meat stew (553).

Boundaries in space, time, and ideas appear throughout the play. Aeschylus, defeating Euripides, opposes the *kōmos* in the *agōn*, deriving his songs “from a good place for a good purpose” (1298 *εἰς τὸ καλὸν ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦ*), eschewing “whore songs and drinking songs by Meletus” (1301-2 *πορνωδῶν, σκολιῶν Μελήτου*; Pütz, 2007). Aeschylus' moderation gainsays Euripides' accusations of padding. Politically, Aeschylus's cryptic comments about jury pay and Alcibiades (1463-1465) likely echo Periclean restraint (Sidwell, 2009; Marshall, 2020); not surprisingly, his heavy lines weigh down the scales.

Theater is not philosophy, so Euripides' positions are incomplete, like those of Aeschylus. Euripides “slimmed down” (941 *ἰσχνανᾶ*) his “swollen” (940 *οἰδοῦσαν*) Muse (Marshall, 2020), but “beeties” (943 *τευτλίοισι*) and “discussions” (943 *περιπάτοις*) are not a meal, even in war. Likewise, Euripides ultimately intimates a fuller strategy than blinding the Spartans with vinegar (1440 *ὄξιδας*).

Aristophanes would have understood the dangers of excess in 405 BCE Athens. The repeated barb ληκύθιον ἀπώλεσεν, aimed at Euripides, exposes the reality that the war has decimated Athenian olive oil exports (Foxhall, 1993). Aeschylus's victory submerges commensality and wine, leaving their muting in the final scene (Pütz, 2007) a final example of a negative space.

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